**"Some Reflections on Globalization, Development
and the Less Developed Countries"**

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Some Reflections on Globalization, Development and the Less Developed Countries[1]

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to show that in reality globalization is an effectively global process because it is of extreme importance for all the countries on earth, including the poorest and least developed of them. Aside from the current impact of globalization on these latter countries, the paper argues that it is not possible to find a solution to the problem of development which does not involve globalization – which accordingly assumes (at least potentially) a strongly positive connotation. On the other hand, it is precisely the existence of problems of global scope – those of development, and in particular of its sustainability – which shows, I believe, the validity and utility of the concept of globalization, distinguishing it from mere internationalization and marking a sharp break with the past.

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Introduction

At least since the first half of the 1990s the term *globalization*, and the concept that it denotes, have enjoyed extraordinary success in the social sciences (Vaccarini, 2000) – and in other areas besides. I have shown elsewhere (Caselli, 2002) that this success, and the enormous scientific output that has been its cause, but also – and perhaps above all – its consequence, (Dore, 1996) has not been matched by the growth of a relatively uniform and structured body of knowledge. Many of the now extremely numerous studies on the topic are contradictory; so much so, in fact, that we still await a definition of the phenomenon which meets with the approval of the majority of scholars [1].

Three theses against *globalization*

In what follows I intend to show that despite the extraordinary success just mentioned, there are numerous authors – working in the various disciplines of the social sciences – who tend to deny either the newness, or the extent, or indeed the actual existence, of the processes conventionally labelled *globalization*. I shall briefly examine three theses in particular.

The *first* is the thesis that globalization is nothing new, and nor does it represent any sharp discontinuity with respect to the past. Globalization – which these authors tend to identify mainly with the progressive opening up of national economies and the increase in economic and financial flows among the various regions of the planet – has, it is alleged, at least two centuries of history behind it (Arrighi, 1998; Hirst and Thompson, 1996; Weiss, 1998). Furthermore, given this premise, some proponents of this thesis claim that the most 'globalized' period in human history is not the current one but that between 1880 and 1913 [2].

The *second* thesis maintains that globalization is nothing but a myth – a process which is either non-existent or, at most, greatly overestimated (Hirst and Thompson, 1996; Wade, 1996; Kavolis, 1987, 1988; Smith, 1991, 1995; Marfleet, 1998). This position rests on the simple and hardly disputable observation that the planet is still riven by deep and apparently irremediable (at least in the short and medium period) social, cultural and economic cleavages and differences.

The *third* thesis links and partly overlaps with the previous one, and it is certainly the most widespread of the three. It is the position taken up by those who argue – with different nuances and emphases, often implicitly but nevertheless unequivocally – that globalization is not a truly global phenomenon. Rather, it involves only a certain number of regions and countries (or, according to some authors, certain social categories) in the world, namely the most developed of them on the one hand, and the so-called 'emerging' ones on the other (Hoogvelt, 1997; Kaldor, 1999). In the words of an African official of the World Food Programme speaking to an international conference on globalization:

Globalization means different things to different people. For a Peruvian farmer unable to compete with the low prices of imported foodstuffs, it means losing his income. For a Czech car worker earning enough to buy his own home, it means prosperity. For a poor Ugandan woman tilling her family plot, it means absolutely nothing (Ngongi, 2001).

Obviously, this opinion, like the others reported above, is heavily conditioned – and it could not be otherwise – by the definition of the phenomenon on which it is based.

Globalization and less developed countries: the theory

My position [3] is different from the three theses outlined above. I maintain that globalization is a real and unprecedented fact. It represents a marked discontinuity with the past, and it involves and is significant – *extremely* significant, though in different ways – for all the regions and people of the planet.

I believe, therefore, that globalization is an effectively global phenomenon. To justify this view we must consider in particular the role and the position within globalization itself of the poorest countries of the planet, which at first sight, as said, could be excluded from the phenomenon. The question is therefore as follows: is there a place for the less developed countries in current globalization processes? And if so, what is it?

On inspecting the scientific output on the theme, one notes a curious fact: the less developed countries have fulfilled an extremely important, albeit passive role, in all the theories commonly regarded as the forerunners of globalization (Axford, 1995; Hoogvelt, 1997; Waters, 1995) – imperialism, world system, dependence, modernization – or to use Ray

Kiely's (1998a: 7) expression with regard to the work of André Gunder Frank*, implicit theories of globalization*: that is, theories which, although they cannot defined as being concerned with globalization in the strict sense, preceded and significantly stimulated explicit reflection on the topic. Indeed, I do not think it far-fetched to argue that one of the aims of many of these theories is precisely that of explaining the great inequalities between the richest and poorest regions of the planet (Bradshaw and Wallace, 1996: 39).

With the advent and then the explosion in the second half of the 1980s of explicit debate on globalization, where the initial emphasis was almost exclusively on its economic aspects, the role within globalization of the less developed countries was largely ignored. Very often at that time the term 'globalization' was essentially associated with the process that some called the *triadization* of the economy (Ohmae, 1985). It should also be pointed out that the fall of the Berlin Wall induced many scholars to concentrate their analyses on the countries which formerly belonged to the Soviet bloc, rather than those belonging to the so-called Third World.

More recently there seems to have been a reversal of tendency, and analysts of globalization processes have shifted their attention much more markedly to those countries which do not rank among the most advanced ones. However, I believe that this reflection still has a number of weaknesses. On the one hand there is a tendency to consider, in relation to globalization, only *some* of the underdeveloped countries, thus denying the effective globality of the process: the so-called emerging countries, those whose economies appear most promising in terms of possibilities for growth, and those with the largest populations. On the other hand – although this position is not necessarily incompatible with the previous one – there is a tendency to interpret the impact of globalization on the less developed countries by emphasising solely its negative aspects (although these are sometimes undeniable) and frequently using even apocalyptic language to do so: exploitation, pillage, cultural imperialism, neo-colonialism, and so on. Not by chance, some of those who take up this position argue – like some theorists of dependence before them (Amin, 1970, 1976) – that the less developed countries must *disengage* themselves from current globalization processes (Carmody, 2002); although this is an option, as I shall show later, which I believe to be entirely impracticable.

Globalization is truly global: the unbreakable link between globalization and development

The time has come for me to explain my statement concerning the effective globality of globalization processes and their importance for all the countries of the earth, including the less developed ones. The crucial point, I believe, is that despite the often harmful impact of globalization processes on the poorest regions of the planet, it is not possible to find a solution to the problem of development which does not involve those same processes, which in this sense assume an at least potentially positive connotation. Development is by now a global problem, and as such it must be addressed with equally global strategies. Very often, in fact, the main obstacles against the development of a country – starting from the invasiveness of multinationals or certain of their policies – cannot be removed by that country on its own, but instead require coordinated effort on a wider scale. It is principally for this reason that I said that the option of *disengaging* from globalization processes is not a viable one for a country. Furthermore, globalization involves a series of flows – of ideas, goods, images, people, and so on (Appadurai, 1990) – which traverse the planet; flows that very often threaten or endanger people but also attract them and gratify them (Mastrojeni, 2002: 88). By now almost all the inhabitants of the world know, or at least have a vague idea of, the benefits enjoyed by the inhabitants of the more advanced countries, and in many cases yearn for those benefits themselves. Only a despotic regime, or one indifferent to its subjects' rights to freedom, would – with necessarily violent action – seek to halt those flows: the dire consequences of such action are testified by the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

The problem of development – development which must be more than mere economic growth (UNDP, 1990) – transcends the national dimension, for there is no country that can imagine achieving this objective without forming relations with other states. Moreover, the specific aspect of the *sustainability* of development – and more generally of the sustainability of the lifestyles of contemporary societies – is unequivocally a global question, besides being probably one of the most concrete examples of what globalization is. All the inhabitants of the Earth – whether they belong to the rich countries or the poor ones – share a single environment: the planet Earth, whose utilizable natural resources and capacity to absorb waste and pollutants, although considerable, are limited. Obviously, there has always been only one Earth for humanity, but only in recent decades has its finiteness impinged upon the consciousness of individuals and begun to constrain their social lives (Giaccardi and Magatti,

2001: 4). Consequently, the fact that the development policies carried forward in any region of the planet are sustainable to a greater or lesser extent is a problem that concerns all human beings, for those policies affect – even profoundly – the environment which they all share: namely, planet Earth. Not coincidentally, worries about the sustainability of development arose with the onset of a series of ecological problems whose causes could not be attributed to one single country, nor affected it alone: the greenhouse effect, the hole in the ozone layer, the destruction of the world's forests, and the decline of biodiversity [4].

The development of the less advanced countries therefore directly and very closely concerns the more advanced countries as well. This is an assertion that contradicts the opinion of those authors who maintain that the wealthiest nations no longer need the poor ones and therefore tend to ignore them (Kiely, 1998b: 53; Sachs, 1996: 26). Now, it is likely that some of the more advanced countries have forgotten the poor ones, but this has been due to an extremely serious error of political judgement, not to an objective lack of linkages.

More generally, the global problem of sustainability creates indissoluble links among all the nations of the earth, and it requires solutions that transcend the capacity of each single state or other collective actor (Mastrojeni, 2002: 134). Were a country to devise and apply a perfectly sustainable model of development, its action would certainly be admirable, as well as being an outstanding example to emulate; but that country would still continue to pay the price of the unsustainable behaviour of all other countries, both those bordering upon it and those situated even in regions remote from it.

The interactions necessary between the North and South of the world

The problem of the development of the less advanced countries, and in particular of the sustainability of that same development, therefore requires close collaboration between the countries of the North and South of the world. Indeed, still present in the South is an extraordinary stock of natural resources which humanity as a whole cannot afford to dissipate. But at the same time the integrity of that stock is threatened by the ambitions – more than legitimate, for that matter – for development of the more backward countries: development which the countries of the South – most of which are extremely poor – are pursuing (almost invariably with little success) and will continue to do so with all the means

available to them. The problem is that the means most immediately available to them are those with the heaviest impact on the environment. They involve the use of 'nature-intensive' techniques applied in markedly inefficient manner. Moreover, there is no mechanism which sets an automatic brake on the *unsustainable* action of an individual country. "Now it is our turn to pollute", declares a Brazilian politician (Latouche, 1991); and it is normal – but not inevitable – that the least developed countries should seek to follow the same road taken by the most successful ones. And the road to success has been precisely that of the devastation of their natural environments; a road that can be taken by each country individually but not by all of them, lest human life itself face extinction (Tarozzi, 1992: 46-51).

It is therefore in the interests of the countries of the North of the world – besides adjusting their production and consumption patterns according to sustainability criteria – to foster the sustainable development of those of the South. And they can do this principally by equipping the less advanced countries with the technology necessary to give greater sustainability as well as efficiency to their development model (Pench, 2001: 319-20). This endeavour should take the form, not of a unilateral act of benevolence, but of an exchange in which both parties benefit (positive sum game): an exchange between technology, capital and expertise, on the one hand, and protection of the South's stock of natural resources (still sufficiently intact, and from which each country can draw benefit), on the other (Biggs, 1998: 117-118). It is therefore necessary to abandon the logic of unilateral aid – which to date has proved largely a failure because of the ethnocentric attitudes of the aid-givers (Dia, 1993). For this to be possible the countries of the South may take cognizance of the fact that protecting their natural resources is not solely an impediment against their development; rather, it can become – if appropriately used – an extraordinary instrument for negotiation and exchange in the international arena. For that matter, technology and capital are not the only things that the South needs at present. In exchange for the protection of the South's natural resources the countries of the North could also offer a revision of trade agreements and protectionist measures – I am thinking in particular of textiles and agricultural produce – which greatly compromise the poorest countries' possibilities of development (UNDP, 2002).

It should be pointed out in this regard that the countries of the world's North are apparently beginning to realize – some more than others – that global commitment to sustainable development is necessary. However, their concern for the sustainability problem often gives rise to no more than an attempt to prevent other countries from behaving as irresponsibly as

they have done in the use of natural resources. To be noted is that the principal conventions on the environment, which prove so difficult to implement, envisage the solution as being the simple reduction of current levels of pollution – which seems to establish the principle that "simply because they have polluted more in the past, the developed countries have the right to pollute more (per capita) than the less developed ones" (Stiglitz, 2001: 133). For this reason, ecological worries are often regarded by the governments and populations of the world's South as some sort of neo-imperialism (Beck, 1996: 6). Global action for the protection and intelligent management of the planet's resources should not consist merely of a set of negative actions or prohibitions. Such prohibitions are very often harmful to the conditions of the poorer country (Logan, 2002) and, as scholars and politicians in the less developed and other countries point out, they often smack of hypocrisy.

Developed countries have called on every nation around the world to end CFC production, but the poor developing countries have asked, "How can we possibly acquire the money, technology, and expertise required to produce alternatives to CFCs?" The situation is especially frustrating to developing countries because they are just beginning to enjoy the "benefits" of CFCs by acquiring air conditioners and other products that emit the harmful chemicals. Developing countries also see the stance taken by developed countries as hypocritical. Developed countries have been the primary users of CFCs and now, having found alternative chemicals, they insist that developing countries get their houses in order too, knowing full well that poor countries cannot do so without substantial assistance from the North (Bradshaw and Wallace, 1996: 163-164).

More ethically acceptable, therefore, would seem to be a universal tax on the emission of pollutants (Stiglitz, 2001: 133).

Conclusions: globalization really does exist

I began this paper by saying that there are at least three positions in the current debate which deny the effective importance and extent of globalization and the processes that it implies. I have argued in this regard that the distinctive feature of globalization processes, the one that demonstrates their reality, impact, discontinuity and difference from those, for example, of mere internationalization, is the presence of *indivisible* elements, phenomena and problems inevitably and inexorably shared by the whole of humanity. One of these problems is indubitably the sustainability of development as discussed in this paper; but one cannot afford to ignore the threat raised by the existence of nuclear weapons. Mankind's technical ability to

destroy life itself on our planet in just a few seconds – in the case of a large-scale nuclear war – is a phenomenon that marks a radical break with the past and transcends any cleavage that may traverse the planet. I would point out that not coincidentally a major stimulus for reflection on globalization was the Chernobyl disaster, which proved incontrovertibly that nuclear fears were not mere academic hypotheses, while it also – extremely importantly – made a mockery of the boundaries drawn by politics and history, above all the notorious 'Iron Curtain', demonstrating that it is by now impossible to conceive of closed 'worlds'.

The linkage between the nuclear threat and the problem that has been addressed by this paper of the sustainability/unsustainability of development is the concept of *risk*. If overall globalization processes generate profoundly ambivalent dynamics while simultaneously give rise to unity and rupture, there are those who argue – the main reference cannot but be to Beck and his celebrated Risk Society (1986) – that risk is the most unifying and levelling factor in contemporary human experience.

I would stress in conclusion, however, that it has not been my intention to deny the fact – incontrovertible, I believe – that globalization is a highly asymmetrical process characterized by marked imbalances and irregularities. Nevertheless, as said, it is an effectively global phenomenon, given that it concerns all the regions and inhabitants of the planet. Globalization is indubitably a process that has its winners and losers. The latter however, as John Tomlinson (1999: 130-137) points out, are not such because they are excluded from globalization, but rather because they are disadvantaged internally to it. In the words of Chiara Giaccardi and Mauro Magatti (2001: 28) "you cannot be *outside* globalization […] but there are various modes of existing *within* it".

Notes

(1) By *globalization* I mean the set of processes which: (a) increase the number and heighten the intensity of contacts, relations, exchanges and dependence and interdependence relationships among the various parts of the world; (b) transform the importance of 'space' and 'time' with respect to those relations and relationships; (c) increase and spread awareness among the planet's inhabitants of the existence of those relations and relationships, as well as of their importance for their personal lives. See on this Caselli (2002: 15-39).

(2) On this see Hoogvelt (1997: 71) and Gallino (2000: 98-9). I shall seek to show the flaws in this thesis later. Here, though, I already cite the observation by Alberto Quadrio Curzio (2001: 29) to the effect that the 'closure' due to the two world wars demonstrates the reversibility of the 'globalization' of that time; a characteristic which seemingly differentiates it greatly from the present-day and more authentic processes of globalization.

(3) Obviously not mine alone. See amongst others Giaccardi and Magatti (2001: 4, 24-6).

(4) Analysis of sustainability began with the Club of Rome's celebrated study on the limits to development (Meadows *et al.* 1972) and received new impetus from the creation in the second half of the 1980s of the World Commission on Environment and Development chaired by the Norwegian prime minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, which in 1987 produced the well-known report *Our Common Future* (WCED 1987), and then in 1992 from the World Conference on the Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro.

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